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**Great Falls Americans Press Release**

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**Yellowstone's offense shines in 5-3 win over Great Falls in season opener**

**By Kevin Scott**

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CODY, Wyo., September 10, 2021 — The North American 3 Hockey League (NA3HL) is back from a five-month offseason as the teams began the 2021-22 campaign on Friday evening.

Great Falls brings back a strong core of players from last year's 2020-21 season in which the Americans finished the regular season in the Frontier Division with a record of 27-11-2-0 and a 3-2-1-0 record in the NA3HL Playoffs to finish overall in second place in the division with a 30-13-3-0 record. The Americans needed three games to escape the wrath of the Gillette (WY) Wild in the NA3HL Frontier Division Semi-Finals but fell short in the Frontier Division Finals against the best team (record-wise), the Sheridan (WY) Hawks, who swept the Americans in two games of their best-of-three series. Sheridan went on to the 2021 NA3HL Fraser Cup (National) Championship Tournament in St. Peters, Missouri, where they finished with a record of 1-1-1 (44-3-1-0 overall).

The one main change from the NA3HL's Frontier Division that the Great Falls Americans participate in include the relocation of the Missoula (Montana) Junior Bruins to Rapid City, South Dakota where they are now called the Badlands (SD) Sabres.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic still lingers, the Great Falls Americans along with the 33 other North American 3 Hockey League teams, are ready for the 47-game regular season to commence. The Americans lost a handful of players from last season, but fourth-year mentor Greg Sears returns 14 players who are hungry to make it back to the playoffs again. A coaching change occurred over the summer when Associate Coach Kirk Golden, who spent one season with the Americans last season, departed for the head coaching position with the NA3HL's Butte Cobras. A familiar face is behind the bench assisting Sears. Former Great Falls Americans goaltender Matt Maniglia, who suited up for Great Falls for the 2019-20 season and last season served as the Americans Goaltending Coach, received a promotion beginning with this season.

Great Falls returns nine forwards, three defensemen, and two goaltenders from last year's squad that made it to the Frontier Divisional Finals. Forwards Jackson Henningsgard (8 goals, 17 assists), Hunter Maschke (8 goals, 14 assists), Henry Fusco (no scoring), brother Micah (20 goals, 11 assists) and Joshua Serino (1 goal, 1 assist), Garrett Weisenburger (7 goals, 4 assists), Great Falls native Russ Rasmussen (1 goal, 2 assists), Billings native Patrick Crooks (2 goals, 2 assists) and Thomas Gazich (1 goal, 1 assist) as he was promoted to the Minot Minotauros of the North American Hockey League (NAHL) at the end of April ([see story](#)). A trio of defensemen include AJ Benit (9 assists), Jay Alford (3 assists), and Clay Walker (no scoring), also from Great Falls. Ben Winkler (5-0 record, 128 saves) and Zac Hattan (1-0 record, 32 saves) return in the net for another season for the Americans. Several newcomers also are set to make their debut too.

The Yellowstone Quake, the home team for tonight's game, struggled in the win column last season as they finished in seventh place in the Frontier Division with a 12-25-2-1 record under former mentor Phil Oberlin. The Quake have ten players back this season including Jack Harris, who registered 45 points (24 goals, 21 assists). CJ Sweigart takes over the coaching duties this season for the Quake.

Returning defenseman Mason Meranger and newcomer Cameron Deforest combined for two goals and five assists to lead the Yellowstone Quake to a 5-3 opening night victory over the visiting Great Falls Americans during Friday night's North American 3 Hockey League Frontier Division action in Cody, Wyoming. Thomas Gazich scored once and dished out one assist in the setback for Great Falls.

Cole Whitman, one of ten returning players from Yellowstone's 2020-21 season, scored the first goal of the game for the host team. The Quake took a 1-0 lead 14:44 into the first stanza. Logan Brown and Mason Meranger, both returning defenseman, gathered the assists. Yellowstone jumped out to a 2-0 advantage 1:43 later when Jack Harris and Cameron Deforest set up Keegan Ferguson for the final tally of the period. Despite no scoring, Great Falls attempted 17 of the 32 total shots.

In the second period, Cameron Deforest and Mason Meranger each chipped in their second assists when Columbus, Ohio native Brandon Kididis lit up the lamp with 14:06 remaining. The Americans trailed 3-0 before Micah Serino and Henry Fusco got the puck by Quake netminder Brandon Lakusta to cut the deficit to 3-2 after two periods of play. Returning players Hunter Maschke, Thomas Gazich and newcomer Aaron Leaf assisted for coach Greg Sears' squad. Great Falls outshot Yellowstone 19-11 after the first intermission.

Great Falls evened up the score (3-3) midway through the final period when Thomas Gazich, after earning one assist in the second period, recorded his first successful scoring drive of the season. The unassisted score came while Yellowstone was down a man due to a penalty. Minutes later, Quake forward Cameron Deforest put in the go-ahead goal (4-3) with assistance from Mason Meranger and Jack Harris. The score would remain 4-3 until the final 14 seconds when the Quake scored the fifth and final goal of the game to ensure the first victory of the season would go to the Wyoming club. After receiving two assists in the first forty minutes, Mason Meranger accrued his first tally of the season with helpers coming from Jack Harris and Cole Whitman.

Despite scoring just three goals, Great Falls accumulated 47 shots in the sixty-minute contest. The home team needed 37 shots with five successful scoring drives.

The winning team from Wyoming was led by Mason Meranger, who scored four points (1 goal, 3 assists) and Cameron Deforest, who finished the opening contest of the season with 1 goal and 2 assists for

coach CJ Sweigart's first win as the head coach of the Quake. Meanwhile, Thomas Gazich had a hand in two of the three scoring opportunities for Great Falls with one score and one assist.

Both squads combined for fifteen infractions that resulted in 30 minutes of time spent in the sin bin. The visiting team took advantage of two of their seven power play chances. Yellowstone went 1-for-4.

Quake goalie Brandon Lakusta, a native of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, stopped 44 of the 47 shots attempted by Great Falls to earn his first win. He gave up two goals in the second and one in the third frame. The Americans had two goaltenders see action on the ice with returning netminder Ben Winkler starting and playing for the first 26 minutes before being replaced by newcomer Will Simpson of Anchorage, Alaska in the second period. Winkler recorded 13 saves but allowed three goals. Simpson, who was credited with the loss, had 20 saves in the final 34 minutes.

**NEXT CONTEST:** The Great Falls Americans will stay in Cody, Wyoming for the final game of their two-game series against the Quake. Game time is set for 7:30PM (MST) from Riley Arena. After Great Falls' road trip to Bozeman, Montana on Saturday, September 18<sup>th</sup> against the Bozeman Ice Dogs (7:30PM MST), they will make their home opener against the Gillette (WY) Wild on September 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> from the Great Falls Ice Plex with the action starting at 7:30PM (MST) each night.

**NOTE:** Due to leaky cooling pipes underneath the ice at the Great Falls Ice Plex, the Great Falls Americans may not be able to host their home opener against Gillette on September 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> if the repairs aren't made by then ([see story](#)). Please check back on the Great Falls Americans website for more details when available.

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